



## 73: Dustin Henderson Saves the Day by cali-chan

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*"Okay... so what do you suggest to do?" "I suggest we kidnap him and put the two of them in the same place at the same time." Mike and Eleven were not dealing well with separation, so Dustin was going to take matters into his own hands.*

I love Dustin sfm. I should write him more often.

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The first thing Jim noticed as odd when the door opened was that dinner was not on the table. Usually when he came home early, Eleven would heat up dinner and have it ready on the table so they could eat right away when he got in— something he kept telling her she didn't have to do, but she liked to do it anyway. Eventually he just let her do as she wanted, because hey, at least it wasn't waffles.

Today the table was clear, however, and Eleven was nowhere to be seen in their living area. "Hey, kid, do you not want to eat dinner yet?" he called out as he took off his hat and left it on the rack by the door.

There was no response, which was the second odd thing he noticed. She'd opened the door with her powers, after all, which meant she hadn't just up and left; normally she would've at least poked her head out of her room by now. "El?" He made his way to the door of her room, which was halfway open, and found her sitting on her bed, back against the headboard and knees pulled up to her chest, hurriedly trying to wipe her tears off her cheeks.

Okay, that wasn't just odd; it was alarming. "Hey, hey, what's wrong?" he asked as he took long strides until he was by her bedside. She'd been trying to make herself stop crying, he could tell, but as soon as he sat down beside her, her face crumbled again and she hid

it against his chest, staining the shirt of his uniform with her tears. "El, what's going on, sweetheart? Did something happen?" he asked again, wrapping an arm around her shaking shoulders.

Her voice was muffled against him as she finally responded. "Mike doesn't like me anymore," she said, sobs cutting off her words intermittently.

At her words, Hopper felt his soul come back into his body. Thank goodness; it was just teenage silliness rather than something actually important. But then he realized, *shit*, this teenage silliness was really hurting her and he should probably say something to make her feel better, right? That's what fathers do.

"What? Come on, that's the most absurd thing I've ever heard," he scoffed, patting her shoulder to try and get her to look at him. As much as it pained Jim to admit it, that boy looked at El like she was the sun, the moon, and the stars. There was no way. "Where did you even get that idea?"

"He didn't come," she replied, still crying, and he took that to mean he hadn't come to visit her that day. Which he wasn't sure was by design—her little friends had come up with some kind of rotation so that one or two of them would visit almost every day, but Jim wasn't paying enough attention to know if it was an actual schedule or if they just stopped by whenever they wanted. Certainly the Wheeler boy was the one who visited the most often, he could tell that much.

"Well, he probably just got caught up or something—" he started, but she cut him off with a shake of her head.

"Three weeks," she clarified with a sniffle.

"Three w— oof." Alright, that *was* strange. But he was sure there was a good explanation for it. Had the kid gotten grounded or something?

"He hasn't even called," the girl added, a small sob catching on the last word, as she gestured in the general direction of her bedside table, where her walkie-talkie he'd given her for Christmas stood proudly.

That was even stranger, because for months now Jim had been falling asleep to the sound of those two giggling over the radio waves every night. "Okay, listen," he tried again, gently rubbing El's back in an attempt to get her to stop crying. "You don't know that it's because he doesn't like you anymore. I find that *very* hard to believe. Have you tried looking for him? In the... in the void, I guess," he asked, referring to that thing she did where she could find people with her powers.

Eleven nodded. "He's always studying," she admitted with a frown.

"Well, then. Maybe that's it. Maybe he's just been busy," Jim offered, hoping that would be enough to alleviate her worry. It's not like the boy had been hanging out with other girls or anything. Surely that had to count for something, right?

"That's what Max said," she mumbled, but her sobs did seem to have slowed down for the most part.

"See? That Max is a smart kid. You should pay attention," he said, very carefully, because *crap, which one was Max, again?* He knew Will because he was Joyce's kid, and because of the whole Upside Down thing, and of course he knew Mike because El wouldn't shut up about him ever, but all the others sort of blended together in his mind. Was Max the girl?

"Alright, here's the deal," he started, as she finally pushed away from him to wipe her tears again. Other than some sniffing, she seemed to have calmed down considerably. "I can try to go and check up on him. I'd rather not, because it's risky," he added, making sure she knew the danger it entailed. If the lab people were actually still surveilling Hawkins, the Wheeler household would be the first place they'd be watching. And he couldn't just up and pick the kid up at school— too many people around. "But if you really want me to check on him, I will. Do you want me to?" he offered sincerely, hands on her shoulders.

The girl stared back at him for a few seconds, contemplating her answer. Finally, she shook her head. "You'll scare him off," she retorted, the corner of her lips lifting only ever-so-slightly.

Jim rolled his eyes. "Hey!" he exclaimed, mock-offended, but in reality he was glad to hear that tone again. If she had even a little of her usual sass back, then she couldn't be that sad anymore.

He affectionately tousled her hair— which was now long enough that the curls could be tucked behind her ears— and stood up. "I'm sure you'll see him again soon, kiddo," he told her, and she tried her best to give him a small smile in return. "In the meantime, why don't we go eat? I'm starving," he added, pointing in the direction of the kitchen.

She nodded and got up off the bed as well, walking around it to do as he suggested. When she passed by him, she paused to give him a sideways hug. He dropped his arm around her shoulders and they walked together out of her room, to share a nutritious meal of reheated TV-dinner leftovers and Eggos with chocolate spread for dessert.

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Dustin laid back on the couch in the Wheelers' basement, reading his most recent comic book purchase for the third time... that week. He'd come over to Mike's after school to work on their final project for science class, which they had partnered on— they were building a Styrofoam plate speaker, which they had to have ready for next week.

They'd been at it all afternoon, and they hadn't quite managed to get it to work even a little yet. Finally, after much frustration, they'd decided to take a break. Or, well, Dustin had, because apparently Mike didn't take breaks anymore.

He looked over at his friend from above the edge of his comic book. Mike was sitting at the table where they usually played D&D, surrounded by books, almost aggressively taking notes on a notebook just off to his right. His other hand was pushing his hair away from his forehead, his irritation evident in that gesture alone.

Dustin's gaze went back to his comic. "Man, I never thought I'd say this, but I think this run of *New Mutants* might be my favorite comics storyline ever. It is just. So. Cool," he stated, knowing very well he wasn't going to get a response—mainly because he hadn't gotten one for anything he'd said since they stopped working on the speaker.

He was correct in his assumption. Mike didn't say anything... didn't even bother looking up from his notes. "Do you think David's going to die by the end of this? I think he will. I mean, he's just too ridiculously overpowered to be around, you know? I bet you five bucks he kicks the bucket."

Even with the prospect of extra arcade money on the table, Mike did not take the bait. So Dustin kept pushing. "I mean, there's Phoenix and all, so maybe he *could* still be around... but there's only so many of these super mutants they can have around, right? Otherwise it all starts becoming too easy. And that would *suck*. I mean, half the fun of the X-Men is seeing them use their powers as a team; if you make things too easy that would *ruin* it—"

Finally, Mike looked up with a huff. "Dustin, for the hundredth time, can you *please* just *shut up*?" He shook his head. "I have to finish going through this book if I want to be able to borrow another one tomorrow."

Dustin put the comic down on his lap. "Okay, first: it's not the hundredth time you've told me that—you have literally not spoken a word since I sat down on this couch an hour ago." He pushed himself up so he was sitting rather than lying down. "And second: there's no need to be rude, man," he added, throwing his friend a pointed look.

Mike glared at him. "Well, how do you expect me to be nice when you're being so freaking annoying?" he retorted before going back to his reading, as if trying to tune him out again.

"I'm only trying to help!" Dustin insisted, shaking his head. "You're going to drive yourself into an early grave if you keep going like this. You *do* remember that report isn't mandatory, right? You don't *have* to turn it in if you don't want to," he added, gesturing to all the books Mike had on the table.

"Yes, I do," Mike gritted out, once again without looking up, but Dustin thought the pencil he was writing with might snap, he was holding it so tightly.

"Okay, fine— you don't have to bark at anyone who so much as comes within five feet of you, then," Dustin threw back, gesticulating widely with his arms.

That got Mike to look up with a frown. "What the hell are you talking about?"

Dustin shook his head in disbelief. Was his friend really that dense? "What am I talking about— *you*! You've been snapping at anyone who even dares talk to you for weeks! And we're all sick of it!" He dropped his comic on the couch and stood up, making his way to the table. "You haven't even realized that Max has been giving you the silent treatment for days now, even Will doesn't dare ask you anything out of fear that you might bite his head off— and there's a *reason* why you ended up as *my* partner for science rather than Lucas's."

Mike's expression had turned into a full-on scowl now. "Well, *sorry*," he retorted, sounding anything but. "I don't know if you've noticed, but I have a shit-ton of schoolwork to get done before finals, and it's not exactly *easy*—"

"Oh, that is just *bullshit*," Dustin interrupted him, stretching out the last word until it sounded like two. "You've had tons of schoolwork to do before, we all have, but usually you don't get *this* irritable about it. There's something else going on here, and I'm gonna figure it out," he vowed, pointing at Mike as if daring him to disagree.

The other boy just glared. "Well, if I'm so *irritable*, then you should just go home, then. I can finish the speaker on my own." He grabbed his pencil in a death grip again and started writing angrily, pointedly ignoring Dustin once more.

"Oh, I'm going home, alright, because this cloud of negativity you've got going here," he gestured in a circle at the table, like it was some kind of cocoon Mike had ensconced himself in, "is sucking me in, and I really don't want to be in a bad mood tonight. But you're not kicking me out of our project, dude. I've worked hard on that stupid



speaker, too, so I'm going to come over again tomorrow and we're going to finish it if it's the last thing I do, damn it."

"Fine," Mike shot back.

"Fine!" Dustin echoed, then turned on his heels to go pick up his stuff. He grabbed his *New Mutants* comic, the books he'd left at the foot of the couch, the leftover magnets and cables and materials they hadn't used on their project that day, and grabbed his backpack to start shoving everything in.

He couldn't believe what an ass Mike was being. Honestly, what was up with him? It's not like it was their fault he had a ton of shit to do. The school year was almost over, it was their last year of middle school and they were *all* dealing with a crazy amount of schoolwork — but Mike couldn't pull his head out of his ass long enough to even notice how freaking awful he was being.

It was almost like déjà vu. Seriously, Mike hadn't been this moody since...

His stuff fell out of his hands and back onto the couch when the realization hit him. "That's it!" he exclaimed, almost as a reflex, and spun around again to stare at Mike with wide eyes. "I know what your problem is!"

His friend lifted his head with a groan, almost like it weighed too much to justify the movement. "What now?" he asked Dustin with a deadpan expression.

A smile started forming on Dustin's lips without him even willing it. "You haven't been to the cabin in a while, have you?"

Mike's expression darkened immediately. "This has nothing to do with El," he threw back, figuring out what Dustin was getting at straight away. Dustin knew he didn't like it when people teased him about El, so he always got really defensive when the conversation started going that way, but this time he wasn't backing down.

This needed to be said. For science. And, you know, for the sake of their party. "Oh, my man, it has *everything* to do with El," he insisted,

a full-fledged shit-eating grin now drawn on his face. He pointed at his friend again. "You haven't been to visit her in like three weeks, and it's getting to you." He chortled. "That's it! You're going through El withdrawal!"

Aaaaand the scowl was back. "You don't know what you're talking about."

"Oh, yes, I do," Dustin retorted, walking up to the table again. This time he pulled out a chair near Mike's and dropped himself on it. "Dude, why don't you just take one afternoon off and go visit her? You know it'll make you feel so much better."

"I *can't*," he replied, and it was the first time Dustin could clearly tell the frustration in his tone was about more than just schoolwork. "I have to finish all this crap before finals. So I'm trying to get it done as quickly as I can— the faster I'm done with this stuff, the sooner I can go see her."

Dustin could tell the separation was rough for him, but personally he thought he was torturing himself for no good reason. "You sure?" he tried again, reiterating the one solution he was sure his friend needed at the moment.

"Yeah, it's fine," Mike said, then he sighed, putting his pencil down in the fold of his notebook. "Listen, I'm sorry if I've been a dick to you guys lately. Feel free to call me out on it if I ever do it again," he offered, finally looking at Dustin with a semi-contrite expression. "I just... I need to get this done. Okay?"

"Okay," Dustin conceded, but it wasn't okay, not really. He stood up and stretched his back. "I'm gonna go home anyways. We'll keep working on the speaker tomorrow, right?"

"Yeah, sure," Mike muttered, but he'd already gone back to his reading. Dustin packed up all his stuff and, with a quick goodbye to his friend, made his way out the basement door. As he picked up his bike, however, he decided this issue wasn't over. Not by a long shot.

Dungeons & Dragons aside, he understood very well what his role in their party was. He was the observer. He saw things the others

couldn't see, and he came up with solutions the others couldn't come up with.

And if his friends weren't going to take the solutions he gave them, then he was going to take matters into his own hands.

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The next day after school, he told Mike he needed to do something at home before they started working on their project again, so he'd bike over to his house a bit later. Mike bought the excuse hook, line and sinker, and biked home with Lucas, as they usually did.

Dustin, instead, drove his bike over to the Hawkins Police station.

"Hello, Ms. Florence," he greeted Hopper's secretary, who was sitting behind her desk near the entrance to the precinct, with a bright smile. They'd met on previous occasions when he and the rest of the party had stopped by to ambush— erm, *talk* to the Chief about a certain fugitive he was harboring in his cabin in the woods (not that Flo had any idea about that, of course). "How are you doing this fine afternoon?"

"Mr. Henderson," Flo returned with an amused smile. "If you're looking for the Chief, I have to let you know once more that he is very busy with work, and doesn't have time to deal with trivial matters." Dustin chuckled. Flo always insisted they shouldn't bother Hopper with silly stuff, but somehow they always got their way.

Dustin might be useless when it came to chatting up girls his own age, but he happened to be very good at charming women his mother's age or older. It was a gift.

"Of course, of course," he nodded, acknowledging the warning. "I don't plan on taking up much of his time. I just wanted to remind him that he agreed to stop by our Social Studies class tomorrow to tell us a little about the law enforcement system in Hawkins. I thought he might forget."

Flo looked at him from above the upper rim of her glasses. "Hopper told you he'd give a speech at your school?" she asked him, sounding flabbergasted. "*That* Hopper?" She pointed in the direction of the Chief's office.

Dustin wanted to laugh at her expression, but managed to keep his amiable smile in place as he nodded. "Yep. He did. To be honest, I was a little surprised, too," he added, just to make things a bit more realistic.

Flo leaned back in her chair, looking as if she couldn't make heads nor tails of the idea of Hopper giving a speech in a room full of middle-school kids. "Huh. Well, I guess I'll have to remind him, then." She still sounded befuddled by this turn of events, but so far she seemed to be buying his story.

He sprang into action before she could grab at her phone. "Oh no, no, I don't want to bother you with this. I can just go in for a second and remind him myself. It's down that corridor, right?" He was already making his way to Hopper's office before she could object.

When he got to the right door, he caught sight of Hopper animatedly (...not!) working on paperwork. Dustin figured that was a good thing, since it meant he'd probably welcome any interruptions— even from nosy kids. "Hiya, Chief," he greeted, also knocking on the open door a couple times to make sure he got Hopper's attention.

The older man lifted his head to see who had spoken, and then stared at Dustin for a second, as if he couldn't believe he of all people was standing at the entrance to his office. Before the man could say anything, however, Dustin went straight to the point. "Say, you wouldn't happen to have a moodier-than-usual teenager waiting for you back at home, would you?"

"What—" Hopper frowned at him for a moment, as if trying to piece the meaning of that sentence together, and then his eyes widened. "*Close the goddamn door,*" he warned in a harsh whisper, and it was only then that Dustin realized he'd basically asked about El out loud for any passersby to hear.

"Oh, shit! Right, right," he turned around and hurriedly closed the

office door, noting with some relief that nobody was around. Their secret was safe, despite his unintentional slip. When he turned back to look at Hopper, the Chief was still glaring daggers at him. "Sorry," he said sheepishly, raising both hands as if that alone could prove his innocence.

The glare did not abate. "The hell do you want?" Hopper asked gruffly, clearly not inclined to give him a pass on his teeny tiny mistake.

"Um, I was just wondering if Eleven's been... crabbier than usual lately," he repeated, this time in a slightly-less-dramatic fashion. Hopper clearly wasn't in the mood for humor.

"How do you even know that?" the man retorted, sharply.

"Uh, because Mike's been snarling at everyone for like three weeks?" he revealed with a shrug. "I don't think they're dealing well with separation," he added, shaking his head sadly.

"Yeah, no shit, Sherlock," Hopper retorted, sarcasm dripping from his every word. He was still frowning. "She thinks he doesn't like her anymore."

"What? That's ridiculous," was Dustin's immediate reaction. The day Mike stopped liking El was the day the world would implode. They'd see Max's bully of a stepbrother show up at school in a pink tutu way before they ever came to a point when Mike stopped making goo-goo eyes at Eleven every time she was near. Oh, no, that wasn't the problem. The problem was that she *hadn't* been anywhere near him for an extended period of time, and it was gnawing at them both.

"That's what I told her," the Chief agreed, and then he ran a hand over his face, as if he was tired. "I never thought I'd ever be saying this, but why the hell has Wheeler not been visiting lately?"

"It's not about El, you can be sure of that. Mike's just being too stubborn for his own good. It's all his dad's fault, really," Dustin explained, leaning on the backrest of the chair by Hopper's desk which visitors were supposed to use. "Mike's worst class— apart from P.E., that is— has always been Geography. On his last report card he

got a B- in that class— which is not a bad grade at all and he knows it.

"His parents didn't even scold him, really; they just told him he could try a little harder and let it go for the most part, but then his dad went all like..." He imitated Ted Wheeler's deeper voice and permanently-pinched expression. "You've got to keep your grades up, Michael. Otherwise how are you going to get into college? You can't even dribble a ball."

He saw Hopper frown again, but this time at the story, rather than at him. Clearly he didn't understand Ted Wheeler any more than any of them did. Dustin continued. "And Mike hates it— *hates* it— when his dad says stuff like that. So now he's determined to get an A in the stupid class. So he went and asked the teacher for an extra-credit assignment. The problem is that Mr. Kowalski's held a grudge against Mike since Mike told him to fuck off last year—"

"He did *what*?" Hopper interrupted him abruptly. Dustin actually didn't mind; he'd thought the Chief was tuning him out the entire time he'd been speaking, to be honest. "Aren't you brainiacs supposed to all be teacher's pets or something?"

"Yeah, that was before we knew El was okay," Dustin pointed out as an explanation. "...It was a dark time for Mike. We don't like to talk about it," he added quickly, and perhaps somewhat dramatically, but he couldn't help himself. The year El was missing was tough for all of them, particularly Will, but Mike had almost become a completely different person; he'd been hurting, that much was obvious, but none of them had any idea of how to help him. It still stung when he thought about it. Hopper just shook his head, unamused.

"Anyway, so Mr. Kowalski gives him this *huge* report to do about the main natural resources of every country in Asia," Dustin continued. "Which is really stupid because who needs to know all those details about every country in Asia? Nobody, that's who. Isn't that what books are for? I mean—"

"Hey, hey," Hopper cut him off before he could go too far down that tangent. "*Focus*," he all but ordered him, that serious "I'm the Chief of Police so you will heed my commands" tone he used so well

resonating in his words.

"Right," Dustin nodded. "The thing is, between that report, and our science project, and finals coming up, Mike's basically spending every available second working on schoolwork, and that's why he hasn't been able to visit El." He shrugged. "And because of the thing with his dad, he probably won't unless we kidnap him and put the two of them in the same place at the same time."

Hopper leaned back in his chair, somewhat suspicious, but still humored him. Dustin imagined it was because he was just *that* desperate to cheer Eleven up. The man might be ridiculously intimidating, but he had actually turned out to be a pretty good dad. "Okay... so what do you suggest to do?"

"I suggest we kidnap him and put the two of them in the same place at the same time," Dustin replied with a nod.

Hopper's eyes narrowed.

Dustin grinned. "Don't worry, I've got a plan."

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The next day, Dustin insisted they switch things up a little, so instead of going to the Wheelers', Mike instead came over to Dustin's place after school, where they'd be working on their Styrofoam speaker.

Mike had called his mother from the school's pay phone and told her he might have to stay the night if it took too long to get the speaker working— their deadline was coming up fast, so they couldn't afford to waste any time. Mrs. Wheeler understood that this project was a big deal, so she didn't mind her son sleeping over at his friend's house, even though it was a school night.

They stopped briefly by Mike's so he could pack up some clothes, and as soon as they got to Dustin's house, they dumped all their stuff in his room and got to work. Dustin would do the actual modifications

to their speaker (different cables, more magnets, fewer magnets, this type of paper is too stiff... you name it, they tried it) while Mike would search the books for any sort of troubleshooting solutions. It was tedious work, but they had made some progress. They might even to get this done today, Mike kept saying.

Except by the time 4 o'clock rolled around, Dustin started getting antsy, and Mike noticed. "Okay, what is up with you? You've been looking out the window every five seconds like you're waiting for something."

"What? No, I'm not waiting for anyone," Dustin attempted to deflect — not very effectively, at that, but it didn't really matter at this point. "I'm just, you know, admiring the landscape around my house that I see every single day of my life—"

His tirade was interrupted by loud honking coming from outside. "He's here!" Dustin yelled and got up off the floor, running around his room while picking up Mike's overnight bag and hoodie, and the books he knew he would want to take with him.

"Who's here?" Mike asked, looking completely baffled by Dustin's odd behavior. Dustin knew he should probably explain for his confused friend's sake, but he also didn't want to give him an excuse to reject his plan. Nor did they have time for it. "What are you *doing*?" Mike tried again as Dustin finished throwing the last book into his backpack and zipped it closed.

"No time to explain," Dustin said, handing him all his stuff, which Mike had no choice but to grab because it was being shoved in his face anyway. "Okay, here's what you're going to do: go out the back door, walk all the way around the house, then slide down the hill. The truck should be parked by the curb just out of sight. You're welcome."

"A truck— what are you *talking* about? I thought we were going to finish the speaker—"

"I'll get the project done, no worries," Dustin waved off his concerns, pushing him unceremoniously out of his room and toward the back of the house. "We were almost there, anyway."



"But what about your mom—"

"I'll handle my mom," Dustin retorted, shaking his head. Honestly, he didn't like lying to his mom; she was so trusting and supportive, it made him feel like a jerk whenever he had to. But some things just had to be done— it was okay, he told himself, if it was for her own safety. Or in cases such as today, when it was for the good of humanity. You know, love and goodness and all that crap.

"What the hell is going on, Dustin? You can't just randomly make me *leave*—" Mike tried again as they made it to the back door of the house, but Dustin wasn't having it.

He turned his friend around, his arms still loaded with stuff, and stared directly at him, hands on his shoulders in case he needed to shake some sense into him. "*Mike*," he started, dead serious. "*You have to do this*. Or do you want to be the one to tell Hopper that he came all the way out here for nothing?"

"*Hopper*?" Mike asked, completely stumped by the weird turn this conversation had taken. But that only lasted for a moment. Soon enough the pieces began falling into place in his brain, and Dustin could see exactly when the realization of what was going on hit him. "Hopper's here?" he asked after a moment.

"Yes," Dustin confirmed. "And you need to get going. Like *now*."

He opened the door and signaled to Mike to go already. He was almost afraid his friend was going to refuse altogether, but after a second of doubt he saw Mike nod. "Okay. Okay," the harried boy agreed as he dropped everything at his feet, rushing to secure his backpack on his shoulder. Dustin snapped his fingers at him to move faster as he shouldered the bag where he carried his extra clothes. "I'm going, I'm going!" he said as picked up the hoodie from the floor and made his way out.

Dustin leaned against the kitchen counter, ready to bask in the relief and satisfaction that his plan had worked, when Mike popped his head in again. "Hey, Dustin," he called out, and Dustin turned his head only enough to look at him. "Thanks," Mike finished with a bright smile before disappearing outside.

It was the first time he'd seen Mike smile in weeks. Dustin went ahead and gave himself a pat on the back for a job well done.

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Hopper parked the Blazer as he always did, in the clearing closest to the cabin, just off the dead-end road on the turn at the oak tree. He turned off the ignition and leaned back in his seat, taking a second to himself before he had to launch into this conversation.

The Wheeler kid beat him to it. "Why did you bring me here?" he asked from his position in the passenger's seat, though he sounded more curious than anything else.

"Because she's miserable and I have to live with her," Jim offered in response, which was more-or-less the truth. After their talk the day he found her crying in her room, she'd been trying to be a little more upbeat, but Hopper could tell the separation was still weighing on her. She missed the boy— she missed *Mike*, he amended in his head. She didn't say it, which relieved some of the pressure on Hopper, but he still knew.

The boy was still looking at him warily. "I thought you didn't like me," he pointed out carefully, like he was only half-calling him out on it.

Jim straightened up in his seat and leaned forward, leaning against his arms on the steering wheel. "Yeah?" was the response, as he studied the kid's expression. "How do you figure?"

"Well, for one, you always glare at me when I'm around," he retorted matter-of-factly, with a shrug. And Jim had to give it to him— he really did glare all the time. It's not like he was just imagining it. It was kind of an involuntary reaction.

He took off his hat and held it in his hands over the dashboard. "Is that why you haven't been coming over?" he asked. He knew what the Henderson kid had told him was the reason, but he wanted to

hear it from Wheeler himself, just to make sure. He didn't want Eleven to suffer because there was something else going on underneath that he didn't see.

The boy frowned. "No," he said, as if the matter should be obvious. "I just have a ton of stuff to do for school." He paused for a moment, then added in a mutter, "I'd still come see El even if you didn't want me to."

And Hopper didn't doubt that. Those kids were crafty; they'd find a way to meet somehow. And he knew El well enough— if he didn't come to her, she'd eventually go to him. And that could be catastrophic. Which is why he needed this conversation to come out right.

"It's not about you, kid," he started, measuring his words carefully. "It's just that she's my—" The word was still strange to say. The *feeling*... that he already had, grafted deep into his bones. He didn't know when that happened, exactly, but he knew it didn't take long after he first took her in. But the word was still new, and still tripped a little as it came out of his mouth. "She's my daughter, so it's my job to protect her from any boys who might hurt her. You get me?"

The reaction was immediate. "I'm not going to hurt her!" Mike retorted with a scowl.

Hopper groaned. "I know. I know you won't. You care about her and you want to protect her just as much as I do. That's actually something we have in common," he admitted somewhat grudgingly. Then he shook his head. "But she's growing up quick, and if staring down her boyfriends is the only thing I can do until her life is completely out of my hands, then goddamn it, that's what I'm going to do." He sighed. "It's not personal. It's just a father thing."

The boy watched him quietly for a minute or so, as if processing everything he said, but then he shrugged. "My dad doesn't care about any of that stuff," he muttered, and, really, no shit. One need only see how Nancy spent more nights at the Byers' than she did at her own home to know that Ted didn't give a rat's ass about what his kids might be doing behind his back.

Jim had never interacted much with Ted Wheeler. He was older than them— certainly older than Karen, but also him and Joyce and everyone from their class— and as far as Jim knew, he'd been boring and bland since he was in the womb.

He'd never in his life figured Ted would be an attentive parent, but he'd assumed his arms-length approach would at least mean that he wasn't heaping unattainable expectations on his kids. He was wrong. The story he'd heard from the Henderson boy had bothered Jim; it bothered him a lot, actually.

Mike Wheeler probably did not know this, but Jim Hopper knew a thing or two about feeling like he could never live up to his father's expectations. It was another thing they had in common. Granted, Ted was probably not as bad as his own old man had been— Jim still remembered the snide remarks, the screaming matches, the times he got kicked out of the house until he "got his act together." The boy definitely didn't have it as bad as that, but it still had to hurt. Kid was only fourteen. No wonder he was always so defensive around adults.

He scoffed. "Yeah, well, your dad's an idiot," he retorted, then looked over at Mike, just in case. "Uh, no offense."

He was surprised to find the boy fighting back a grin. "None taken," the kid quipped back, and— hey, look at that, they were bonding over how much of a loser Ted Wheeler was. Well, more or less. Who would've thought?

"Listen, here's the thing," he started again, trying to bring the conversation back to where he'd initially wanted to go. "You and I may not agree on everything, and there'll probably be plenty more things later on that we butt heads on. But whether I like it or not, you make her happy. So as long as you keep doing that, and you respect her and respect the rules of *my house*," he emphasized the words with a direct stare, "then you and I ain't got a problem. Got it?"

The boy ruminated on that for a few seconds, but then he narrowed his eyes at him. "Does that mean you're not going to glare at me anymore?"

Hopper's response was another scoff. "Yeah, don't push your luck,

kid," he said, shaking his head. Goddamn kids. Too cocky for their own good.

The boy was staring solemnly at him when he looked over. "Okay. I can do that," he agreed with Hopper's pitch of making Eleven happy, and from the way he held his gaze without a flinch, Jim believed he meant that pledge.

"Good," Jim declared, rubbing his eyes with the heel of his hand. "Halfway happy," he muttered to himself. Joyce had told him once a few months ago that the key to raising teenagers was negotiation, but Hopper would bet her kids didn't give her nearly as many gray hairs as these two had given him in just a few months. Not without external interference, at least.

Then he noticed one of the boy's legs was bouncing up and down, like he couldn't wait to get out of the car. "Can I go now?" He moved to open the door.

"Eh, eh!" Jim called out before he could run to the cabin. "Here's how today's going to work. You can spend the night here, and tomorrow morning I'll take you back to the Hendersons' so you and whats-his-face with the hat can bike together to school." Seriously, he needed to figure out which of the little misfits was which. This was getting ridiculous.

He shook his head, shelving that one for later. "Tonight, we're gonna have dinner, then you two can hang out until eleven pm. After that, it's lights out— she goes to bed, and you sleep on the couch. And if I find out you've put so much as one toe inside her bedroom during the night, God help me, Wheeler, you're losing visitation rights until you're forty. Am I understood?"

Mike nodded emphatically. "Yes, sir. Can I go *now*?"

Hopper rolled his eyes, but signaled toward the door. The boy didn't even blink before throwing the door open and skipping— *skipping*, bags bouncing against his back as he did so and everything— toward the cabin.

Once El opened the door, Jim went in first. "Hey, kiddo?" he called

out, knowing she'd be in her bedroom. "Someone's here to see you." Wheeler stepped inside just behind him, still hauling two bags and a hoodie, and barely restraining himself from simply going to her straight away.

It took a few seconds for her to appear in the doorway to her room, but it only took half a breath for her eyes to widen as her gaze fell on the boy. "Mike," came the whisper, and then she was rushing around the couch, past the rickety side table, and *launching* herself at Wheeler, arms tight around his neck. The boy only took a second to drop everything he was carrying on his back before wrapping his own arms around her waist, drawing her close.

Hopper decided to let them have their moment, so after leaving his hat on the rack, he went over to the fridge to get a beer. They were still hugging when he took his first sip. It's not like he meant to keep watching them or anything, but it was a small cabin. They were talking in low tones, but he could still hear them from where he was standing.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry," the boy was saying directly at her ear. His eyes were closed tightly, like he was trying to hold back an onslaught of emotion threatening to burst out of him.

Jim couldn't see El's face, but he could tell from the wobble in her voice that she was crying. "Why did you stay away?" she asked, punctuating the question with a small snuffle at the end.

"I didn't want to, I just had so much homework, and I was trying to get it all finished so I could come see you—" He sounded almost desperate as he explained, and Hopper flashed back to when the Henderson kid told him Wheeler had been "snarling" at them for weeks. Yeah, desperation would do that to a person. He knew that from experience.

"You didn't call either. On the walkie," El insisted, a sob cutting halfway through the words.

"I know, I know," the boy insisted, dropping his head against her shoulder. "It's just— Holly grabbed my walkie and hid it somewhere, and I haven't had any time to look for it, but I wanted to call you

every night—"

"I thought you didn't like me anymore," his daughter admitted finally, in a small, hesitant voice. It broke Jim's heart all over again.

Wheeler let out a breath in what might've been a disbelieving huff, or a mirthless chuckle. "No, El..." He pulled back from their embrace only just the tiniest bit, so he could look at her as he spoke. "That is *never* going to happen. Okay? Not ever. You're my favorite," he declared, absolute certainty and earnestness and devotion dripping from his words, and something in Jim's stomach clenched almost painfully. Jesus, he was way in over his head with these two.

Eleven nodded at Mike's words, still teary, but gazing at him like he was... well, like he was *everything*. "You're my favorite, too." She leaned in and for a moment Hopper was afraid they were going to kiss right in front of him, but instead she leaned her forehead against the boy's. "I missed you."

"I missed you, too," Wheeler echoed, closing his eyes again, breathing in deeply.

"Please don't stay away anymore," she urged him.

"I won't," he replied immediately, shaking his head. "I won't." El nodded in return, then hugged him tightly again, burying her face in the crook of his neck.

Figuring they weren't going to let go of each other anytime soon, Hopper decided to make his way around the couch to turn on the TV. Once he found a sportscast he didn't mind (a pre-game broadcast for that night's Cubs game), he dropped himself on the couch and waited for the kids to be done with their little reunion.

They did break it up eventually, joining him in the living room as he watched the baseball game and they caught each other up on what had been happening in the three weeks they'd been apart. Dinner was a lively affair, with both kids genuinely happy for the first time in a while. Wheeler even got some schoolwork in, with El helping him read countries' names off the map of Asia in his Geography book. And by the time everyone went to sleep, their separation once again

seemed like nothing but a bad memory.

(Hopper only realized his warning about their sleeping arrangements had been a little *too* specific when he woke up in the morning to find the two of them cuddled up under one blanket at one end of the couch, Eleven resting her head on Mike's shoulder while he rested his cheek against the crown of her head).

(Oh, well. Now he knew for next time).

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Dustin put his fork down as he swallowed the last bite of his dinner. "Oof. I'm stuffed. That was great, Mom," he effusively complimented his mother's cooking skills. It made him feel just slightly better for lying to her again.

Looking down at his empty plate, he wondered what Mike and El were having for dinner at the Hoppers'. Something you bought frozen, probably. Or maybe Eggos. He chuckled to himself.

"Thank you, sweetie," his mom told him as she picked up his plate so she could rinse it before throwing it in the dishwasher, but the grin on his face must have caught her attention because she paused momentarily. "You've been awfully smiley all through dinner, Dusty. What's that all about?"

He snickered. "Oh, you know... star-crossed lovers," he replied vaguely.

His mother's eyebrows rose high on her forehead, surprised. "Oh! Are you reading *Romeo and Juliet* in class again? That's always fun," she commented, excited. She did love her Elizabethan romances.

"Sure, Mom... something like that." He stood up, ready to go back to his room and get working on that speaker, when an idea occurred to him. "Hey, Mom, I know Mike said he wasn't feeling well enough to have dinner, but don't you think some dessert might cheer him up a



bit? That always seems to work for me when I'm sick," he pointed out smartly.

"Oh, that poor sweetheart. Are you sure you don't need me to call his mother?" his mom offered, for the third time since Dustin had informed her that Mike was feeling a little out of sorts and preferred to stay resting in Dustin's room rather than having dinner with them.

He shook his head, again for the third time. "Nah. It's probably just the meatloaf we had at lunch not sitting well with him. I'm sure he'll be feeling better by morning," he added, knowing full well that Mike would show up the next morning looking like the happiest person on Earth.

His mom nodded, understanding. "Well, you can have a Snack Pack if you want. I bought some earlier when I went to do groceries. Don't let him eat it if he's still feeling too queasy, though. You don't want to make the nausea worse," she warned.

"I won't!" he agreed, and reached into the pantry to look for the delicious chocolate pudding dessert. Once he found them— pausing momentarily to frown at the new plastic cup packaging he still couldn't get used to— he grabbed two: one for himself, and one for "Mike," before reminding his mother not to go into his room, just in case Mike was asleep. He needed his rest.

His mom gave him a kiss for being such a good friend, and he retreated back to his room, ready to work on his science project while having his fill of gooey, chocolatey deliciousness.

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**Notes:** Hey, if he managed to hide a man-eating, interdimensional mutant slug from his mother for days, then covering for Mike for one night should be easy-peasy. I'm juuuuuust saying.

Mike, Dustin, and Hopper are my favorite characters in *Stranger Things* (in that order), so this story was sort of fated to happen, I

guess? I do have to give a shout-out to Rinso on AO3, whose comment on *I think they'll be thrilled* had me going down the rabbit hole of trying to find common ground between Mike and Hopper. Thank you very much for the idea.

Also: Fuck you, Ted.

The comic book Dustin's reading is *New Mutants* no. 27, which came out in May 1985 and is the second in a series of three issues that introduced the character of David Haller, aka Legion. It's one of my favorite *X-Men* runs of all time. Spoiler alert: Dustin's going to lose that bet, and FYI, you absolutely *can* have that many super mutants around. Hunt's Snack Packs are the brand of chocolate pudding Dustin steals from the school's fridge in the season 1 finale. The company switched from cans to plastic cups in 1984. Also, yes, you can make speakers with magnets, paper, and Styrofoam plates— I've never made one myself because I'm stupid when it comes to electrical engineering, but I've seen them in real life and they're just wicked cool.